

## Connotations of "Strange Meeting"

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Wilfred Owen's early imitations of the Romantic poets had been a means of learning his "trade" as a poet (to use Yeats' word for a poet's vocation) but without producing poems of permanent value. It was not until his stay in Bordeaux, and still more after his experience of the realities of modern war that Owen's investment in the Romantics began to pay dividends. There are traces of Keats and Shelley in "Strange Meeting" but no one denies that the poem is essentially original: no one else could have written it. Luckily for him, Owen's poems have been edited by a long line of poets—Edith Sitwell, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, Cecil Day Lewis, Jon Stallworthy—and this is a posthumous existence he would have appreciated. He was a poets' poet. Like Keats, Owen wished to be judged by his peers. Just as annotated editions of Keats demonstrate the way in which some of his best poems owe a great deal to deliberate or unconscious echoes of his predecessors, so editors have similarly identified a wealth of echoes in the poems of Wilfred Owen.<sup>1</sup> Many of these were discovered by Stallworthy; others were summarised in his two splendid editions.<sup>2</sup>

An excellent example is offered by "Anthem for doomed Youth," the poem that made Sassoon realize that Owen was an important poet. It is a useful example because the material is readily available and unambiguous. Moreover we have facsimiles of five manuscripts, reproduced by Day Lewis and in the Stallworthy biography, and we can watch how under Sassoon's tutelage, Owen turned it into a great poem.<sup>3</sup> He had been working on two related fragmentary poems,<sup>4</sup> one of which contained the line—

Bugles that sadden all the evening air,

and the other a variant of it—

Bugles sang, saddening the evening air . . . .

It speaks also of the "wailing of . . . shells" and contains another re-usable line—

The monstrous anger of our taciturn guns.

At this point Owen seems to have read the prefatory note to a popular anthology, *Poems of Today*, and he was naturally disgusted by its sentimental and sanctimonious tone. It referred to one poet who had been killed in action as one who had "gone down singing to lay down his life for his country's cause." It went on to extol the uncritical variety of the anthology's contents in phrases Owen might himself have used five years before: "the music of Pan's flute, and of Love's viol, and the bugle-call of Endeavour, and the passing-bells of Death." The bugle-call linked up with the bugles of Owen's unfinished poems. He seized on the passing bells for the first line of his sonnet, even in the version he first showed Sassoon, and finally revised as

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

He altered "The monstrous anger of the taciturn guns" to become his second line. The word *taciturn* was hypermetrical and not appropriate to a barrage. He introduced the wailing shells in the seventh line. Stallworthy provides less significant parallels to the sextet of the sonnet. No doubt Owen had read Binyon's "For the Fallen" (which was later to adorn half the war memorials of Britain), but it is by no means certain that Owen echoed it in the final line of his sonnet in the phrase "each slow dusk."

The annotation on this poem throws considerable light on its composition and on its indebtedness to what may have seemed to be a piece of accidental reading. It supports the theory of Lowes in his monumental book on Coleridge, *The Road to Xanadu*<sup>5</sup> that single words may lead to the fusion of disparate sources. The annotation is so effective, indeed, that it may make us despair, after so many years of devoted

harvesting, of gleaning any more. In order to test this feeling, I propose, in the year of the Owen centenary, to consider one of his most famous poems, the one that has pride of place in more than one edition, the one that best exemplifies Owen's attitude to the war just before he was pronounced fit for active service.

When he returned to France, the war was in its final stages. The last German offensive had failed and the army was retreating as rapidly as possible. The arrival of American forces meant that the end was in sight, and soon the German allies began to treat for peace. Although Owen's friends hoped to arrange for him a less dangerous posting than a return to the front, he decided to go back. He wanted to show his solidarity with the chief victims of the war, the soldiers; he wanted to prove that he could be a good officer in spite of his shell-shock; and he thought it was his duty as a poet—only so could he validate "Strange Meeting."

On the eve of his embarkation, and later, Owen declared that his nerves were in perfect order. Commenting on Shelley's "Stanzas written in Dejection near Naples," he declared:<sup>6</sup> "Serenity Shelley never dreamed of crowns me. Will it last when I shall have gone into caverns and abysmals such as he never reserved for his worst demons?" It did last. He "fought like an angel."<sup>7</sup> He won the Military Cross for bravery; and, what he valued more, he received the unconscious tributes of the men he led.<sup>8</sup> In his last letter to his mother, he told her, "You couldn't be visited by a band of friends half as fine as surround me here."<sup>9</sup> He was probably echoing Henry V's speech on the eve of Agincourt, in which the soldiers are described as a "band of brothers."<sup>10</sup>

"Strange Meeting" has been copiously annotated. Stallworthy has traced echoes of two fragments written between November 1917 and the following March. Sven Bäckman devotes twenty pages of his book tracing echoes of the Bible, Barbusse, Cary's Dante, Keats, Shelley, Sir Lewis Morris, Harold Monro and Sassoon.<sup>11</sup> It was Dennis Welland<sup>12</sup> who first pointed out the source of the title in Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*, Canto V. Owen also knew Monro's "Strange Meetings" but although his poem may have reminded him of the Shelley passage, it had no direct influence on Owen's poem.<sup>13</sup> Shelley describes how the tyrant's soldiers

stab Laon's comrades as they lie asleep. Laon tells them that even slaves are men and should be forgiven:

. . . —and all  
 Seemed like some brothers on a journey wide  
 Gone forth, whom now strange meeting did befall  
 In a strange land . . . .  
 Thus the vast array  
 Of those fraternal bands were reconciled that day.<sup>14</sup>

It should be added that Shelley expressed similar ideas of the necessity of forgiveness with greater artistic control in *The Masque of Anarchy* in which the militia are converted by the non-violent resistance of the demonstrators, thus reaching a happier outcome than the Peterloo Massacre by which Shelley had been outraged and inspired. Even more effectively Shelley put into the mouth of Demogorgon at the end of *Prometheus Unbound* a recipe for the defeat of tyranny:

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;  
 To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;  
 To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;  
 To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates  
 From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;  
 Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;  
 This . . . is to be  
 Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;  
 This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

Owen, of course, was familiar with these lines, which are not direct sources, but may perhaps by widening the focus throw some light on Owen's poem. We can first attempt to answer the question posed by Stallworthy whether Owen regarded the poem as completed or unfinished, to show that the facts of Shelley's life may be significant sources, and to prove that there was a native source for Owen's use of parahrhyme.

An examination of Keats' *Hyperion* should help us to answer the first of these questions. Owen possessed H. Buxton Forman's edition of Keats' works in five volumes.<sup>15</sup> He would have known that in the 1820 volume, *Hyperion* is called a fragment. He would also have known the

way in which Keats stressed this fact<sup>16</sup> by ending the poem in the middle of a sentence

. . . —and lo! from all his limbs  
Celestial—

According to Forman, both the sentence and the line would have been completed:

Celestial glory dawned, he was a god.<sup>17</sup>

If one turns to the chaotic manuscript of "Strange Meeting" in Jon Silkin's anthology<sup>18</sup> (not the final manuscript which went to the printer) it is clear that Owen had not made up his mind about the final version, but he had intended at some point to end with the half line "Let us sleep now." He wished to indicate, as Keats had done with *Hyperion*, that the poem was a fragment.

Owen possessed the Cary version of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the translation that Keats carried with him on his Scottish tour and which he echoes in several of the poems written after he had abandoned *Hyperion*.<sup>19</sup> Critics have pointed out some echoes of Cary in "Strange Meeting," but the general influence of the *Inferno* is more important than the details. It depicts the landscape of hell and the conversation of the newly dead.

The strange meeting described by the narrator is with a German who is a poet like himself. The words he uses are Owen's own. He speaks of "The pity of war, the pity war distilled," as Owen in his fragmentary poem had declared, "The poetry is in the pity." In other words Owen meets his *doppelganger*. Owen had read in *Prometheus Unbound* that

Ere Babylon was dust,  
The Magus Zoroaster, my dead child,  
Met his own image walking in the garden.<sup>20</sup>

We know from several accounts of the last months of Shelley's life that *doppelgangers* were not confined to his reading. The events were sparked off by the death of Allegra, the arrival of Claire Clairmont (Allegra's

mother), and on June 16, by Mary's miscarriage. Shelley, who had earlier, as he thought, seen Allegra rising from the sea, now had a number of visions or hallucinations. He met a phantasm, like himself, who demanded: "How long do you mean to be content?" (This may have been suggested by an episode in a Calderón play.) On another occasion the Williamses appeared to him, mangled and battered, and had warned him that the sea had flooded the house and was pounding it to pieces. More terrifying than any of these was the vision of his *doppelgänger* trying to strangle Mary.<sup>21</sup> If Owen knew any of these stories it might have reinforced his idea of his meeting the enemy who was himself.<sup>22</sup>

Another passage in Owen's preface—"All a poet can do to-day is to warn"—links up with another passage in the poem. His spokesman laments that their deaths would prevent them from warning future generations about the reality of war. This is followed by the prophecy, which has attracted surprisingly little comment:

Now men will go content with what we spoiled,  
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.  
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress,  
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.

The implication is that the war will be followed by increased militarism. The "swiftness of the tigress" does not have the eulogistic tone of David's lament for Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1:17), cited in Stallworthy's edition as a parallel. It is made clear in Fragment 131 ("Earth's wheels run oiled with blood") that the tigress symbolises cruelty, and that it is better to break ranks than "trek away from progress." By the time "Strange Meeting" was finalised, he had decided not to break ranks, but he still adhered to his symbolism. The tigress remained evil.

The prophecy that nations would trek from progress was fulfilled in the history of the next twenty years. In Italy, Germany, Spain, Russia, France, Britain and Japan, the governments under a variety of banners (Patriotism, Justice, Honour, even Progress) trekked from progress. The results may be symbolised by Guernica, the Gulag, the Holocaust, Hiroshima and so on. The history of those years, beginning with the treaty of Versailles, showed the impotence and cowardice of the great powers to halt aggression in Manchuria, Abyssinia, Czecho-Slovakia,

Poland and elsewhere. The dead Owen had indeed warned; but his warnings were ignored.<sup>23</sup>

The last points on which I want to put the record straight are to do with the question of par rhyme. Dennis Welland suggested that Owen was introduced to the device by the French poet, Laurent Tailhade in Bordeaux, who told him of Jules Romains' verse plays in which he tried to alleviate the boredom involved in the continued use of the rhymed alexandrine in tragedy, although it had become progressively less effective than it had been in the hands of Corneille and Racine. Whether this was Romains' motive in experimenting with par rhyme we need not enquire. Owen does not mention Romains and he himself followed stricter rules than Romains had done in his *accords*. Not only did he have identical consonants at the end of the word, but he often began the words with identical consonants, the consonants sandwiching changing vowels: sipped/supped; leaned/lined; grained/groined; escaped/scooped. There is, moreover, evidence that Owen was interested in the possibilities of par rhyme before he went to Bordeaux. He called attention to it as early as 1912 when he was reading John Addington Symonds' book on Shelley, as Stallworthy demonstrated.<sup>24</sup>

There is, I believe, much stronger evidence in support of the view that Owen derived par rhyme from a native source. It happens that 1993 is not merely the centenary of Wilfred Owen, it is the four-hundredth anniversary of the death of Christopher Marlowe in a quarrel with Ingram Frizer on the payment of the bill—"a great reckoning in a little room"—at Eleanor Bull's tavern at Deptford. As I had to address a conference at Marlowe's *alma mater*, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, I took the opportunity of re-reading all his works. In one of them, *The Jew of Malta*, the villain-hero, Barabas, gives an account of his alleged career of crime.<sup>25</sup> As this conflicts with what the audience knows about his early life as a usurer, it is plain that the narrative is pure fiction. This is how most actors play it. Its purpose is not to confuse the audience, but to encourage Ithamore to confess his own actual crimes. Marlowe himself, as a government spy, used precisely this method of encouraging confessions. He pretended to be a catholic, an atheist, a defector to James VI of Scotland, a maker of counterfeit coins. He appears to have been successful as an *agent provocateur*. Barabas tells Ithamore:

As for myself, I walk abroad a-nights  
 And kill sick people groaning under walls;  
 Sometimes I go about and poison wells;  
 . . .  
 There I enrich'd the priests with burials,  
 . . .  
 With digging graves and ringing dead men's knells.

Here were several pararhymes. In "Strange Meeting" Owen, using pararhyme throughout, seems to be echoing some of Marlowe's own pararhymes:

And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—  
 By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.  
 . . .  
 . . . I went hunting wild  
 After the wildest beauty in the world,  
 . . .  
 To miss the march of this retreating world  
 Into vain citadels that are not walled.  
 Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,  
 I would go up, and wash them from sweet wells.

Add to this the echo of Marlowe's "groaning" (II.iii.173) in Owen's "groaned" (4) and of Marlowe's "moan" (II.iii.170) in Owen's "moan" (13) and there can be little doubt that Owen had remembered Marlowe's use of pararhyme in this passage, and probably it was the initial inspiration of the whole method.<sup>26</sup>

My last points relate to John Middleton Murry's review of the *Wheels* selection of Owen's poems.<sup>27</sup> It is generally regarded as the most perceptive appreciation of "Strange Meeting." Certainly he recognized Owen as a major poet; but I doubt whether his remarks on pararhyme correspond with common experience. He declares that every reader first assumes that the poem is written in blank verse, only later realising that it is not. I can only say that I have yet to meet a reader new to the poem, whether adult or undergraduate, during the last sixty years, who reacts in this way. Some may complain that the rhyming is imperfect and therefore to be deplored, but they still recognize it as a kind of rhyme.



My other disagreement with Murry is with his conviction that pararhyme could not be used for any other purpose than Owen's. This has not proved to be true; and Murray lived long enough to know he was wrong. Owen was a cult figure during the period between the two wars, and many poets, good and bad, used varieties of pararhyme for many different subjects.<sup>28</sup>

I have attempted in this article to prove that "Strange Meeting" was intended to be a fragment, that the lives of authors, as well as their poems may have influenced Owen's work, and that Christopher Marlowe was an *agent provocateur* of pararhyme.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Miriam Allott in her edition of Keats' poems (London: Longman, 1970) records numerous echoes. In the "Ode to a Nightingale," for example, she has quotations from two of Horace's *Epodes*, several from Milton, Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Coleridge, one from Dryden and Hazlitt and from a large number of others.

<sup>2</sup>Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. Jon Stallworthy, 2 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, The Hogarth P, and OUP, 1983); *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: The Hogarth P, 1985).

<sup>3</sup>Jon Silkin, however, anxious to defend the superiority of Isaac Rosenberg, regarded Owen's poem as so weak that he refused at first to include it in *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981) 62-63.

<sup>4</sup>Stallworthy (1985) 178-79; (1983) 485-88.

<sup>5</sup>J. Livingstone Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (London: Constable, 1931).

<sup>6</sup>Wilfred Owen, *Collected Letters*, eds. Harold Owen and John Bell (Oxford: OUP, 1967) 571.

<sup>7</sup>Owen, *Letters* 580.

<sup>8</sup>Owen, *Letters* 584.

<sup>9</sup>Owen, *Letters* 591.

<sup>10</sup>*Henry V*, IV.iii.60.

<sup>11</sup>Sven Bäckman, *Tradition Transformed: Studies in the Poetry of Wilfred Owen* (Lund: Gleerup, 1979).

<sup>12</sup>Dennis S. R. Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960, 1978). He shows that there were other echoes of *The Revolt of Islam*.

<sup>13</sup>Owen visited the Poetry Bookshop, run by Monro, and sometimes was given a bed there. Monro read and criticised Owen's poems. Owen possessed two of Monro's books of poems, one presented by the author.

<sup>14</sup>V.xiii.1829-36, Shelley, *Poetical Works*, ed. T. Hutchinson (London: OUP, 1905; rpt. 1971).

<sup>15</sup>John Keats, *The Complete Works*, ed. H. Buxton Forman, 5 vols. (Glasgow: Gowans and Gray, 1900-01).

<sup>16</sup>*The Fall of Hyperion*, as Owen also knew, is broken off abruptly in the middle of a sentence.

<sup>17</sup>Jack Stillinger, *The Text of Keats's Poems* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1974) 232, regards the line as an addition by Keats' editor Woodhouse.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. n3 above.

<sup>19</sup>The poems include the sonnet on Paolo and Francesca, "La Belle Dame sans merci," and "To Sleep."

<sup>20</sup>*Prometheus Unbound*, I.191. It has often been pointed out that the narrator of "Strange Meeting" meets his *alter ego*. See, e.g., Bäckman 23 and 112. But, as Bäckman says, "Owen's own version is a deeply original and personal one . . . and could hardly be said to be directly foreshadowed in any . . . treatments of the motif." I am tempted to mention that in the last Act of *The Cocktail Party*, Reilly recites the passage containing these lines, presumably because Eliot felt it necessary to rise above the prosaic verse of the rest of the play. In the New York production, however, because of the audience's ignorance of Shelley, the passage was omitted. (It may be added that Eliot made another attempt to break away from the trammels of prosaic verse, when he wrote a magnificent passage of ritual for the Guardians. These would have been the most "poetical" lines in the whole play, but they were omitted because Martin Browne, to whom Eliot owed so much, had objected to them. Browne superbly directed a play entitled *Wings over Europe*, regarded by some as the best play of the inter-war years. Its part author was Robert Nichols, another poet of World War I.)

<sup>21</sup>Newman Ivey White, *Shelley* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1947) vol. 2, 368. There are similar accounts in Walter Edwin Peck, *Shelley: His Life and Work* (London: Benn, 1927) vol. 2, 287, 407. Mary was ill; she hated the Italians of the neighbourhood and the overcrowding of the Casa Magni by the Williams family; she was jealous of Jane, as she had been of Claire and Emilia and, as Shelley confessed, but for Mary's objections, he would have liked to stay there for the rest of his life.

<sup>22</sup>Owen possessed the John Addington Symonds book on Shelley, *Shelley* (London: Macmillan, 1909), as he mentioned in a letter (106) and he was delighted with the Bookman Memorial Souvenir devoted to Keats and Shelley in 1912. He possessed three books on Keats, but he may have read books on Shelley from libraries.

<sup>23</sup>It may not be accidental that the absurd dismissal of Owen by W. B. Yeats in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* and in a letter to Lady Dorothy Wellesley (in which he said that Owen hardly deserved a place in a Parish Magazine) came at a time when that great poet was flirting with fascism.

<sup>24</sup>Jon Stallworthy's acclaimed biography, *Wilfred Owen* (Oxford: OUP, 1974; rpt. 1993) 70.

<sup>25</sup>*The Jew of Malta*, II.iii.172 ff. *The Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Roma Gill (Oxford: OUP, 1971).

<sup>26</sup>Owen possessed copies of *Doctor Faustus* and *Edward II*, but the evidence that he had read *The Jew of Malta* seems incontrovertible. Bäckman has a valuable discussion of different kinds of imperfect rhyme and the possible sources of

pararhyme in his last chapter. Yeats, for example, in "The Hour before Dawn," *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1933) 133, rhymes "tub" with "rob" and "out" with "thought."

<sup>27</sup>*The Athenaeum*, 5 Dec. 1919.

<sup>28</sup>It is only necessary to mention Auden, Spender, Day Lewis and to suggest that in the thirties they would find Owen a more useful model than Yeats or Eliot. Spender makes a similar point in *The Destructive Element* (1935).